Page 7

IMPOSTURES AND CALUMNIES

OF

GEORGE MONTGOMERY WEST.

The William Smith Morton Library

Union Theological Seminary
& Presbyterian School of Christian Education
Richmond, Virginia

At a meeting of the members of the Session of the 2d Presbyterian Church in Albany, Sept. 2d, 1850,

The Report of the Gentlemen to whom our letter of the 22d ult. was addressed, having been received and read, it was thereupon unanimously

Resolved, That said report meets our entire approbation, and that the thanks of our Church and Congregation are eminently due to those gentlemen, for the able and satisfactory manner in which they have performed the task undertaken by them, at our request.

Also Resolved, That said report, with our letter above referred to, be published under the direction of Messrs. Jenkins and McClure, who are hereby appointed a committee for that purpose.

ALBANY, August 22d, 1850.

To Hon. JOHN C. SPENCER, Hon. WM. L. MARCY, Hon. D. D. BARNARD, Hon. ERASTUS CORNING, NICHOLAS HILL, Jun., Esq., T. W. OLCOTT, Esq., Rev. Dr. WYCKOFF, Rev. Dr. POTTER, Rev. Dr. POHLMAN, Rev. Dr. MANDEVILLE, Rev. Dr. BEECHER, Rev. Mr. FRAZER.

GENTLEMEN—

A person by the name of George M. West, professing a clerical character, has recently appeared in our city, addressing the inhabitants in lectures and sermons, in which he has assailed the character of the pastor of our church, and, as we understand, has caused publications to be inserted in a daily newspaper to the same effect.

His complaints are, that in 1841, the Rev. Dr. Sprague wantonly, maliciously, and without probable cause, charged him with purloining two sermons, and caused him and his baggage to be searched for the property; that they were afterwards discovered in Dr. Sprague's library, in such a situation that Mr. West could not have placed them there; that he brought a suit at law against Dr. Sprague for making the accusation, which resulted in a judgment against him, Mr. West, for costs; and that in his recent visit to this city, Dr. Sprague, with the view of persecuting and oppressing him, caused him to be arrested on an execution issued to collect those costs.

Our long and intimate acquaintance with Dr. Sprague, as a pastor, friend, and citizen, forbids our yielding the least credence to these charges.

But we are surprised to learn that multitudes of persons have attended these lectures of Mr. West, and that some of our intelligent fellow citizens have actually imbibed the idea that he has in some way been wronged.

As the representatives of the church of which Dr. Sprague is pastor, we feel it to be our duty to adopt some appropripate mode of investigating these charges, and repelling what we believe to be foul slanders.

The transactions on which they are founded, occurred at a date so remote, that they are forgotton by those acquainted with them at that time, and are wholly unknown to those who have more recently become inhabitants of the city; and thus an opportunity is given for false impressions, which can be corrected only by inquiry.

The individual referred to, we understand, is not subject to ecclesiastical discipline in any denomination of christians in our city or its vicinity, so that we are debarred from approaching any such tribunal. The progress of a suit

at law would be too dilatory to correct the immediate mischiefs of the imputations so freely cast among our community; and besides, the circumstances of the case forbid the Rev. Dr. Sprague from becoming the antagonist of Mr. West.

It is proper to state that our attachment to Dr. Sprague, and our desire to defend his reputation from unfounded accusations, are not our only motives for asking you to investigate Mr. West's charges against him; so far as we are informed, they rest chiefly, if not wholly, upon Mr. West's own unsupported declarations.

If this be the fact, and we believe it is, then it is due, not only to Dr. Sprague, but to the public also, to which Mr. West has appealed, that the reputation and character of the accuser should be inquired into; that the public may know what reliance is to be placed on his statements.

Under these circumstances, we respectfully request you, gentlemen, who are so well known in this community, to investigate the charges above stated, and to enquire whether the conduct of Dr. Sprague in the transactions referred to, was in any way blameable, or unbecoming a Christian pastor, and whether Mr. West sustained any injury to his reputation by the course of Dr. Sprague in his dealings with him.

The circumstances we have stated must be our apology for asking what we know must be an unpleasant labor; but we trust that your sympathy with us and your desire to vindicate the cause of truth and justice, and the ministry of Christ from aspertion, will induce you to comply with our request.

We are your friends,

JOHN BOARDMAN,
NATHANIEL DAVIS,
DANIEL P. CLARK,
GALEN BATCHELDOR,
LEMUEL JENKINS,
JOHN WINNE,
JOHN KELSO,
ARCHIBALD McCLURE,

Members of the Session of the 2nd Pres. Chh., Albany.

ALBANY, *August* 31, 1850.

To John Boardman, Nathaniel Davis, Daniel P. Clark, Galen Batcheldor, Lemuel Jenkins, John Winne, John Kelso and Archibald M'Clure, members of the session of the 2d Presbyterian Church, Albany.

GENTLEMEN:

We have received and considered a communication addressed by you to us, under date of the 22d inst., in which you represent that a person by the name of George M. West, professing a clerical character, has recently appeared in our city, and in lectures and sermons, and in a daily newspaper, has assailed the character of the much respected Pastor of your church. You request us, for the reasons stated by you, to investigate the charges thus made against the Rev. Dr. Sprague, to enquire how far the reputation of Mr. West could be injured by the transactions to which you refer, and how far his unsupported statements may be sustained by his own good character. We have met together and considered your request and have examined sundry documents, letters and certificates relating to the transaction of which Mr. West complains, and relating to his history and character. We do not feel ourselves called upon to institute or conduct any trial of Mr. West, but simply to report to you the substance and result of the evidence. And we are satisfied that any further investigation than such as we have already made, is entirely unnecessary either for the purpose of vindicating the Rev. Dr. Sprague, or of establishing the vile imposture or the bad character of Mr. West.

Indeed, it is in view of the latter purpose only, that we deem the matter worthy of a moment's serious attention. It is always a duty to the cause of truth and religion, to expose wickedness and impos-

ture, when they assume the character of a christian minister and teacher; and that duty becomes the more urgent when we find an utter stranger in the city, or if known to any, most unfavorably known, able to collect together by advertisements, multitudes of persons to hear the abuse of one of their worthiest and most respectable clergymen, who has lived among them unreproached and irreproachable for more than twenty years, distinguished alike for his virtues, his talents and his usefulness.

We have therefore examined the evidence laid before us of this man's history, and we find it to be one of falsehood, imposture and wickedness, wherever he has been known or heard of. To avoid prolixity, we shall give results rather than the evidences of them, referring you to the documents which accompany this report:

1. He assumes the title of a Doctor in Divinity, and persists in using it, although he acknowledged before the Presbytery of Brooklyn in September 1841, as appears from a duly certified extract from their minutes, "that the degree was never conferred on him by any University, College, or other competent authority."

2. He assumes the character of a Minister of the Christian church, publicly conducting religious worship and delivering sermons, as such. We have before us official evidence that having been admitted a Presbyter in the Episcopal church in the State of Ohio; he was in 1836, presented on "sundry grave and very serious charges," and having refused to appear and take his trial upon them, he was by the competent ecclesiastical authority of that diocese, deposed and degraded from the Ministry. We have official evidence, also, that having joined the Presbyterian church and placed himself under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of Brooklyn, he was, in September 1841, convicted by that Presbytery of "falsehood and drunkenness" and "was suspended from the functions of the Gospel Ministry and the privileges of communion in the Church of God, until he shall give satisfactory evidence of repentance;" and that the same Presbytery in February 1843, passed a resolution reciting the proceedings in 1841. stating that Mr. West had given no such evidence of repentance, that he had set at defiance the discipline of the Church, and that "there being good cause to judge that the protection of the Churches and the Ministry at large, requires in his case both the ultimate acts of discipline and their promulgation

to the community, therefore it was unanimously resolved that the Rev. George Montgomery West aforesaid be, and he hereby is deposed from the dignity and the functions of the Ministerial office, and excommunicated from the Church of God." These proceedings were approved by the Synod of New-York and New Jersey.

3. He has recently, in this city, exhibited to gentlemen of the Presbyterian and Methodist denominations, testimonials from persons in Scotland of his being a Minister in good standing in the Episcopal church in that country, in 1847. These testimonials must be forged, and are published by him as genuine, knowing their falsity; or he imposed himself upon Episcopalians in Scotland as a Minister in the Episcopal church, when he had been deposed and degraded from the Ministry in that church. His having carefully abstained from claiming connexion with members of that Church in this city, is of itself evidence of imposture.

4. In the winter of 1849 and 1850, he appeared at Richmond, Va., professing to be a clergyman and lectured on Infidelity. From authentic papers before us, we learn that very soon after his appearance, he was reported to the Pastor of the Church in which he had lectured, as having been found drinking, carousing and otherwise misbehaving himself, in one of the lowest dens of the city. A committee had been constituted on his first appearance to inform the public from time to time of the character of these lectures, &c., under whose auspices they were delivered. In the Richmond Christian Advocate of December 27, 1849, there appeared a card, republished from the Richmond Times, over the signature of Philip Courtney as President, and Wm. W. Parker as Secretary, stating "that articles had appeared in the newspapers, emanating from the committee, highly complimentary to Dr. West and his lectures," and that the committee had unanimously adopted certain resolutions giving them in full. These recite the appearance of West among them with flattering testimonials from Edinburgh and from cities in the United States, and that "the committee had just learned from the most unquestionable authority that the said Dr. West has lately conducted himself in this city in a manner unbecoming a gentleman and utterly unworthy of a Christian Minister"; they therefore resolved that "it is with the most profound regret, we have to announce to the public that we have been egregiously deceived and

imposed upon by the said Dr. West;" and they further resolved, "that in order to prevent similar imposition elsewhere, we deem it our duty further to state that the Dr. West above mentioned is a man of between 50 and 60 years old, of herculean stature, and bears upon his person suspicious marks of intemperance." A letter from the Pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Richmond, states that Mr. West never answered the above card, or made his appearance afterwards in the city, and that the general impression there, so far as he is acquainted with it, is, that Mr. West "is a grand rascal."

5. From pamphlets published in the British Province of New Brunswick, it appears that some thirty years since, and previous to his admission to orders in the Episcopal Church, he presented himself in Quebec as a Methodist minister, and was engaged there in ministerial duties; that he was there involved in pecuniary transactions of an equivocal character, and was obliged to leave the place; that he then became Minister of a Wesleyan Chapel in St. John's, New Brunswick, where he quarrelled with the Trustees, who published a pamphlet accusing him of fraud and swindling, in obtaining and appropriating to his own use, subscriptions for building a meeting-house, and with procuring a title to it in his own name, which he offered for sale on condition of his receiving ordination in the Church of England, and employment by the Society for propagating the Gospel. This offer was, of course, declined.

He was in England in 1831, 1832, where he seems to have been equally successful in obtaining notoriety by the publication of pamphlets denouncing him as a rogue and imposter. A letter of a distinguished clergyman in Liverpool, (whose character is certified by the Rev. Dr. McNeill of that place,) speaking of Mr. West and his operations in England, says "all his dealings in money matters were of a swindling character; all, I think, that were connected with him, suffered more or less. He is a great rogue."

From various sources we learn, that while in England he palmed himself off as an American Bishop, pretending to have been *privately consecrated* by Bishop Chase of the Episcopal Church;—an utter impossibility, as must be known to every one acquainted with the constitution of that church. Being dropped by his former friends in England, on their becoming acquainted with his character, he

commenced there a "Primitive Episcopal Church," of which he declared himself Bishop, set forth a new Prayer Book, consecrated a co-adjutor Bishop, and ordained Priests and Deacons!

6. From various private letters which have been submitted to us, we learn that at different places—on Long Island, at Newark, at Savannah, on board a steamboat, he has been seen in a state of disgusting intoxication, and that he has been found in the lowest grog-shops, and sometimes engaged in drunken brawls and fights with the description of persons to be found in such places. He lectured in various places at the South, but was soon detected and discarded, and was branded by the newspapers as an imposter and hypocrite.

We think it has been sufficiently shown that this Mr. West had no character that could be injured by the occurrences in relation to Dr. Sprague's manuscripts, to which you have invited our attention; and to most men that character would be a sufficient justification of all that he complains of, in respect to that transaction. But it is due to this community, and to the position of Dr. Sprague, that the ample vindication of his motives and conduct, furnished by the evidence before us, should be given somewhat in detail.

In April, 1841, this Mr. West visited Albany in the character of a Presbyterian Minister, bringing with him his credentials from the Brooklyn Presbytery. He was kindly received by Dr. Sprague, preached once in his pulpit, and became his guest, having free access to his study. Mr. West left the hospitable house of Dr. Sprague on Tuesday morning. Shortly after, Dr. S. went into his study to write a title page for his Eulogy on Gen. Harrison, which he had been requested to furnish for publication. This manuscript, with another, containing a sermon he had preached on the preceding Sunday, he had left in open view upon his writing desk, in his study.

On looking for them, they were missing. Diligent search was made for them in every part of the study, where it was supposed they could possibly have been placed, but in vain; they could not be found. The conclusion was irresistible that they had been taken away by some one. To the knowledge of Dr. Sprague, no one, except Mr. West, had been in that part of the house, not even the

members of his family; or if they had, it would have been absurd to suspect any of them of such an act. Dr. S. recollected some strange and improbable things that West had told him, and was struck by the mysterious air that seemed to pervade his history. He had learned that Mr. West professed to have been a Minister of the Episcopal Church, and he thereupon applied to a distinguished clergyman of that church in this city, for information. That clergyman stated that he knew West to be a gross imposter, and that he was acquainted with the general history of his impositions; and he produced a newspaper of the preceding week, called "The Churchman," which contained a communication stating that West had been degraded from the ministry in the Episcopal Church in Ohio, and that he was perambulating the country, telling his own story in his own way, and therefore it called upon the editors of the Western Episcopal Observer to publish "some account of the character and conduct of the notorious individual named above," (Mr. West,) and also calling on Bishop Chase to publish his account of the same individual, "for the purpose of disabusing the public mind and serving the cause of Christian purity, truth and righteousness."

The same clergyman, on being informed of the disappearance of the manuscripts, remarked to Dr. Sprague that there was nothing in West's character to forbid the suspicion of his having taken them.

Dr. Sprague appears to have been very unwilling to indulge this suspicion, and sought the advice of some capable friends respecting the proper course to be pursued. It was due to Mr. West that he should be apprised of the loss of the papers, and permitted to exonerate himself by restoring them; and there was a higher duty to the whole community, to ascertain whether West had taken the papers improperly, and if he had, to expose such a shameless imposter. These friends therefore concluded to send two of their number to Troy, where West was supposed to be, in order to ask him whether he had not taken the manuscripts by mistake; and if they were not restored promptly, and in such a way as to exonerate him, they were then to adopt such further measures as circumstances required. Judge Parmelee, who was selected as one of these per-

sons, intimated to Dr. Sprague, that in the event of a search being deemed expedient, it would be necessary to have his affidavit of his suspicions, and the ground of them. Such an affidavit was made by Dr. S. accordingly, as drawn by Judge Parmelee. Here terminated all the agency of Dr. Sprague in the matter. All the subsequent steps were taken by others, without the participation of Dr. Sprague. A part only of Mr. West's baggage was examined, without finding the manuscripts. He prevented the search of the residue, by denying that he had any more.

We pause here to say, that from this simple narration of facts, it is most apparent that Dr. Sprague could have had no unkind feeling towards Mr. West, and no motive but the desire for truth and justice in making his affidavit, that he acted with great prudence under the advice of capable counsellors, and that there existed not only probable, but very convincing cause for suspecting Mr. West of purloining the manuscripts. This result disposes of the first charge against Dr. Sprague, that he acted maliciously and without probable cause in causing Mr. West to be searched. If the testimony of the latter were worth anything, it might be adduced in this connexion, for he declared to Judge Parmelee after the search, that the circumstances were strong against him, and he did not wonder that Dr. Sprague had suspected him; that he did not attach any blame to Dr. Sprague for what had been done, and that his manner to him (West) had been throughout, friendly and kind.

About six weeks after the search, the manuscripts were found under circumstances as mysterious as their disappearance. Dr. Sprague had occasion to take out of a book-case in his study a bundle of revolutionary muster rolls, which he had collected as autographs, wrapped in a paper covering and tied together. This bundle had not been brought out of its place, to the knowledge of Dr. S. or any one of his family, while Mr. West was at his house or at any subsequent time. To his astonishment, the missing manuscripts were found stuck in the middle of this bundle, with papers so wholly dissimilar. Although this bundle was in a book-case which was not locked, and which was accessible to West, and although West's prevarications about his baggage were known to him, yet Dr. Sprague in the exercise of a very large Christian charity, and in view

of the difficulties which attend a contrary supposition, has always declared that he thought it scarcely possible that the manuscripts could have been returned by Mr. West. This opinion he gave with a statement of the above facts, to the Brooklyn Presbytery in June, 1841, upon an enquiry by that body into the transaction. And this communication, as we understand, arrested contemplated proceedings against Mr. West for his conduct in that affair.

Dr. Spragne has uniformly, from the first to the last, evinced the same readiness to render all the justice in his power to Mr. West. In reply to a letter of Mr. Belknap, of Newburgh, written as counsel for West, in June, 1841, he offered to publish a card stating that the manuscripts were found, accompanied with a statement of the facts which induced his suspicions. Before the manuscripts were found, he had made a similar offer, in the event of their being discovered, which West had declined on the ground that it would do him more hurt than good. In August, 1841, Dr. Sprague distinctly offered to prepare and submit a statement of all the facts for publication, to Mr. West, and if disapproved by him, to abide the decision of arbitrators respecting it. All these offers were declined. And from a perusal of West's letters, from his subsequent conduct in commencing a suit, and from his recent advertisements, we are constrained to believe that he regarded an expected pecuniary advantage as more important than the vindiction of his character from the suspicion of having purloined the manuscripts.

The charge against Dr. Sprague of refusing a just atonement for the indulgence of that suspicion and the promulgation of it by his affidavit, is therefore wholly without foundation. On the contrary, in our opinion, Dr. Sprague has done all that could be required of him as a man and as a Christian to relieve Mr. West from the consequences of the original suspicion, and at the same time protect his own character and motives.

There remains another charge to be considered. It is that Dr. Sprague had persecuted and oppressed Mr. West by causing his arrest for a bill of costs.

After refusing all the offers of Dr. Sprague, Mr. West commenced an action at law against him. In this he failed; a judgment having been rendered against him on a demurrer to a part of his

declaration, and he having abandoned the prosecution of the residue. Of course he was condemned to pay the costs and expenses of his own suit. On his recent appearance in this city, the counsel and attorney of Dr. Sprague, Sanuel Stevens, Esq., to whom the costs ultimately belonged, took measures to collect them, as was his undoubted right and duty. And although nothing could be more just than that Dr. Sprague should be exonerated from costs thus caused by another, yet the proceedings to collect them were had without his direction or desire. This Mr. Stevens certifies distinctly. Mr. S. caused a note to be addressed to Mr. West, requiring payment, and on his neglect, issued process for his arrest on the judgment.

The facts we have stated in relation to the transactions in which the Rev. Dr. Sprague has had any concern or part, are derived from the original letters and documents which the occasion produced, and from certificates of unimpeachable persons as to facts within their own knowledge. They are in their nature incontrovertible.

The real and important facts in the case cannot be disputed, and are not disputed. Mr. West's charges are inferences from them; and these inferences are repelled and shown to be utterly false by the facts and circumstances we have set forth. There is therefore nothing, which Mr. West can say or do, to affect the conclusions to which every intelligent mind must arrive on becoming acquainted with them.

We have thus discharged the duty which you assigned to us, in the manner we deemed most fitting the occasion. We cannot say that it is a painful duty. On the contrary, we take pleasure in being the means of vindicating from most unjust, wanton, false, and sordid calumnies, the reputation of a gentleman whose whole life has adorned the character of a Christain Pastor, and who ranks among his friends the virtuous and intelligent of the whole country, and particularly of those inhabiting this city, of all religious denominations and of all political parties.

And however great may be our sympathies with the unfortunate family connected with the man whose character and conduct we have been compelled by a sense of duty, to trace and delineate, yet we shall have no cause for regret, if this exposition of his vileness shall arrest his career of levying contributions on the credulity of the public by gross imposture and falsehood; or if it shall rescue religion

from the disgrace of such an advocate and teacher; or if it shall impress all with the necessity of some caution in admitting to their confidence a stranger who avows the purpose of ruining the character and destroying the happiness of one of the most respected and most beloved of their fellow citizens.

We are gentlemen,

Your obedient servants,

JOHN C. SPENCER,
W. L. MARCY,
D. D. BARNARD,
ERASTUS CORNING,
N. HILL, Junr.,
THOMAS W. OLCOTT.
I. N. WYCKOFF,
(Of the Reformed Dutch Church.)
HORATIO POTTER,
(Of the Protestant Episcopal Church.)
HENRY N. POHLMAN,
(Of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.)
H. MANDEVILLE,
(Of the Presbyterian Church.)
JOHN FRAZER,
(Of the Methodist Episcopal Church.)
LUTHER T. BEECHER,
(Of the Baptist Church.)